

A MODERN CRUSOE

By CHARLES E. LEWIS IN QUADA

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Were a sailor to be asked the question, "What is an ocean?" he might truthfully answer, "A large body of salt water over thirty for a sailor's life." Out of every storm comes disaster—every calm is a menace to his peace of mind.

We were hoisting up for Archibon Head and the straits of Malacca in the bark Briton, and the bay of Bengal was without a whitewash when, at 5 o'clock one afternoon in the year 1862, I was ordered over the bows by the mate to close the flying jib davit, which had become jammed. I was a fairly grown boy in the second year of my apprenticeship, and an order to call the captain on deck would seemingly have involved no more peril. I scrambled out and was working away with both hands when the bark suddenly rose to a roller which came racing at her from the north, with a crest as smooth as if it had been oiled, and there was an angry fit of her head as she came down, which broke my hold and flung me far out on her starboard bow.

I was under water only a few seconds, but yet when I came to the surface the ship seemed half a mile away, while a sudden signal was giving the crew plenty to do without looking after me. It had come out of the east and out of a sky as clear as a bell a moment before, and it had come with the swiftness of a bullet. I was seen to fall, and as a shot was raised the man at the wheel flung a life preserver over the starboard quarter.



A LAST SHOT OF THE BARK.

This article was simply a block of cork covered with canvas and a stout strap made fast at either end. Two of them hung within reach of the man at the wheel.

The life preserver must have fallen close to me, for when I got the water out of my eyes it was close at hand. I recognized the squat nose of those sudden puffs rightly named a "Bengal terror." They fly like an arrow discharged from a mighty bow, and as their approach is unseen and unheeded many a good ship has been wrecked aloft while sailing peacefully over a placid sea. I fully expected to be picked up after the squall had passed and was not a bit worried, as I got the life preserver under my chest and made the straps fast. The squall did not last three minutes, but it had no sooner passed than the wind, which had hitherto been from the north, whistled into the west and began blowing a gale.

The sun was obscured, the sea got up wonderfully quick, and the last I saw of the bark everything was confusion aboard, and both topgallant masts were gone. Five minutes after she was out of sight I realized that I was doomed. Had she suffered no damage by the squall, she would never lower a boat in the face of that piping gale and frothing sea to hunt for a boy who might reasonably be looked upon as drowned within three minutes after striking the water.

I course had no idea of the position of the bark when the accident happened. I simply knew, as did all the other hands forward, that we were pretty well up to the coast of Sumatra and that two days of fair sailing would see us soon around Archibon Head. Indeed, I didn't bother about the position, but as soon as the bark was out of sight I gave up all hope of being saved. Why the sharks didn't get me during the next 30 hours has always been a matter of wonder, as the waters of the bay of Bengal were swarming with them at the time. I had been drifting an hour or more before I thought of the monsters, and as night came on dark and stormy I got so frightened at the idea of being seized that I shouted for help until hoarse and then became partially unconscious. I remember very little about the events of that night or the succeeding day.

Looking back to it is like recalling a dream. Hunger, thirst, fatigue and exposure kept me in a semiconscious state most of the time, and it was probably better so. The gale lasted most of the night, and as it died down the next day it still blew from the same quarter, so that I drove steadily to the east from the hour of falling overboard. I was not fully conscious of my surroundings when I heard the roar of breakers, and I did not realize that I was being drifted ashore until I was carried in on a big roller, left on a sandy beach for a moment and then carried into the foam again by the undertow.

The next time I felt the sand under my feet, however, I made a struggle for it, and after being half drowned found myself on a sandy beach beyond the reach of the waves. I was sick and weak and threw myself down on the ground, and when I finally awoke from what was like a troubled sleep a full moon was shining in my face and the night was half gone. I sat up and looked around and dimly realized that I had drifted ashore and then crawling on hands and knees under the trees I slept again and did not open my eyes till the sun was an hour high.

I had made a drift, as I afterward learned, of about 60 miles, and waves and tide had cast me ashore on the west side of one of the Rabil islands. There are 12 islands in this group, which lies off the coast of Sumatra, distant about 80 miles. The largest island is about 20 miles long by 10 broad, and some of them are yet permanently uninhabited. Most of the smaller islands are seaward and westward of the big one, and when I came to look around me I found I had been cast ashore on a bit of land comprising not over 200 acres. It did not take me over an hour to walk around it, and I discovered that it was entirely covered with trees, contained two or three fine springs, and that I was six or seven miles from any other island. As for oysters, there were oysters clinging to the rocks at low tide mark, wild fruit and berries to be had for the picking.

and I made no sense of finding shelter in the forest if I chose to look for them.

Sixty eight years ago I had constructed a cabin of limbs and branches under the trees, and I slept through the night as soundly as if in my bunk aboard the bark. I am not going to enter into particulars of the life I led for several weeks, for you can easily imagine there was very little to interest an outsider. I got up a signal staff on the west shore, spent much of my time in looking for a sail, and was cast down and elated by turns over the situation. I had no means of building a fire, and my food was consequently partaken of in a raw state. The weather was warm and pleasant, and after getting accustomed to the loneliness of the situation I rather enjoyed the Crusoe life.

I had been on the island 40 days when I got up one morning to find the sun hidden by a haze which I knew portended a storm. At about noon a typhoon came out of the southwest with such violence that within an hour I was driven to seek shelter at the center of the island, where the forest was thickest, and as the tide was coming in at the same time there was fear that the island would be submerged. At 5 o'clock in the afternoon and again at about 6 tidal waves swept up the beach and into the forest 200 feet above high water mark, and between the same hours the wind had such fury that at least half the island was denuded of trees, bushes and plants and left as bare as my hand.

For hours I lay flat on the ground, clutching the roots of a stout bush, and a dozen times over I had all I could do to keep from being blown away. The gale began to blow out at sundown, and then came a rainfall lasting till midnight, and it was sunrise next morning before I moved down to the beach to look around and see what damage had been wrought. About the first thing my eyes rested on was the hull of a vessel resting almost on an even keel afar up the beach. Both masts were gone a few feet above the deck. Most of her bulwarks had been swept away, and as I took a second look at the hull I made her out to be an old derelict in place of a craft just driven ashore. She had probably been big rigged, but masts, rigging, bowsprit and rudder were gone.

As I went closer, my heart in my mouth for fear I would find corpses on the beach, I took notice of the seaweed and barnacles clinging to the wreck, and when I got close up to her I found great knots of shellfish sticking out here and there along her sides. I could walk clear around her, the tide being out, and it was not until I had made the circuit twice that I solved the puzzle of her being there. One of those tremendous waves of which I have spoken must have lifted her off the bottom of the sea, miles away perhaps, and flung her where she rested. The shape of her hull was ancient, and she carried a figurehead like the which I had never seen before.

There was lots of scrollwork on the stem of the wreck, but if she had ever had her name painted there the salt water had effaced the letters. I looked along her sides clear down to her keel to see if I could find the cause of her going down, but the hull was perfectly sound and in good condition. I hesitated to board her, and in fact it was nearly noon before I did so. I had a fear, as I must admit, of encountering the skeletons of the sailors who were down with her. When I had at last plucked up courage to scramble over her bows, the spectacle was not near as lonely as I had pictured.

Her deck was flush from stem to stern, with no cabin skylight. The two windows at the stern had lighted the cabin. There was a companion way, with a slide to protect it, and something of the sort forward. Though the decks were covered with weeds and shells and alga, I could make out that the craft had carried six cannon on a side. There had been a cookhouse or galley on deck, but that had gone with other fittings and belongings. She was fitted with an ancient windlass, and that was still intact, with a dozen coils of rotten hempen cable about it. On her port bow was an odd looking thing of wood and iron.

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